

## Perspective Digest

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Volume 16  
Issue 1 *Winter*

Article 2

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2011

# Relating to the Bible

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### Recommended Citation

Gane, Roy E. (2011) "Relating to the Bible," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol16/iss1/2>

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***How to interpret Scripture—God's Holy Word—is one of the most crucial issues in the life of a Christian.***

**By Roy E. Gane**

## **PART 1**

Many people associate higher criticism of the Bible with the development of modern thought. But the truth is that for nearly two millennia, people have sought ways to evade or deflate the broad and sweeping biblical claim that, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, NRSV, italics supplied).<sup>1</sup> How much of the Bible is that? "All scripture." Of course, many named and unnamed human

authors and editors participated in producing the anthology we know as the Bible. But God directed the thoughts of these people, who were His co-workers (2 Peter 1:20, 21).

This self-characterization of the Bible has always been under attack because it makes an enduring system of divine principles, rather than human ideas, the guide for belief and lifestyle. Divine principles are to be interpreted and applied within cultural contexts, but they are not to be revised or manipulated to accommodate human desires for control or comfort. As the Word of God, the Bible is to edit our lives; we are not to edit the Bible. This is monumentally inconvenient for human compulsions, including pride and the desire to condone a huge array of sins.

Through the centuries—and today more than ever—people try in various ways to avoid scriptural messages and to make the Bible say what they want it to say. Their approach is characterized by what could be called “higher-critical thinking.” In the past, the term “higher criticism” has been applied more narrowly to modes of scholarly historical-critical inquiry, such as source, form, and redaction criticism. But historical criticism is not an isolated phenomenon; its basic philosophy regarding the Bible also underlies other ways to neutralize the Word of God. Higher-critical thinking manifests itself in a number of ways:

1. **Cut it out.** Thomas Jefferson simply cut out of the Bible everything he didn’t accept, especially including miracles. His radically edited version was known as “The Jefferson Bible.” That is accurate because it was his bible; it was no longer God’s Bible. By own brilliant but finite human wisdom, which he valued above that of the infinite Creator of the universe, Jefferson fashioned his own authority and was happily in charge. He had neutered the transforming power of God’s Word.

2. **Supplement it.** Another approach is to “respectfully” leave the Bible as it is, but to add an overlay of human interpretation that bends or obscures its meaning. Jesus opposed

those who did this:

"He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, "Honor your father and your mother," and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that whoever tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God," then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God'" (Matt. 15:3-6).

According to Christ, the whole Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is based on love for God and other human beings (Matt. 22:37-40). This is because the purpose of the Bible is to reveal our divine Savior (John 20:30, 31), whose character is love (1 John 4:8). But human legalism, masquerading as piety to selectively "protect" biblical principles, rather than the people whom these principles are designed to protect, kidnaps the principles from their home of love and forces them to serve selfish human interests. The so-called "Christian era" has seen human supplements piled on one another. Reformers have escaped many of these only to have their followers amass new systems of them. Human ideas and ways of doing things can be good, helpful, and necessary, but often even good ones take on a life of their own with overblown importance as defining characteristics of a group that eclipse more important values.

**3. Treat it as obsolete.** Another strategy to change the Bible's meaning is to treat at least some of it as obsolete. Thus many "New Testament Christians" treat the (Jewish) Old Testament as less valuable. For example, the laws of Moses are routinely ignored because they are supposedly superseded by Jesus' new (actually renewed) covenant of love (John 13:34), disregarding Jesus' own statement that the whole Old Testament is based on love. Also, the biblical seventh-day Sabbath is superseded by traditional "Christian" Sunday worship (not

established by the New Testament) or by the everyday experience of entering into God's rest (Hebrews 4; actually an experience of faith also available in Old Testament times).

It is true that the Old Testament contains culturally conditioned elements (for example, levirate marriage: Deut. 25:5-10) and penalties applicable under direct divine rule (for example, Leviticus 24:13-23) that we should not try to carry out today. But the laws of Moses encapsulate enduring and authoritative principles that benefit those who observe them in the right way and for the right reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Also, the New Testament contains time- and place-specific elements for our instruction, such as the debate over circumcision and its resolution (Acts 15). We do not live in the Second Temple Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural world of the New Testament. But we can learn from the ways in which God led His people during that period, applying His enduring principles within our own life contexts. We ignore divine teaching at our peril. We need all the help we can get.

**4. Treat it as merely human.** During the so-called "Age of Enlightenment" (mainly in the 1700s), brilliant thinkers asserted that authority over human life was primarily based on human reason. The Bible, which establishes paramount divine authority, got in the way of this notion. So some learned individuals claimed that at least parts of the Bible are merely a human production, which brings these portions down to the level of human reason. This approach, which is still widespread in biblical scholarship, claims that the Word of God is contained in Scripture, but there are parts of Scripture that are not the Word of God.

If some parts of the Bible record or reflect authentic messages from God and others do not, the huge problem is how to differentiate between these components. The process is somewhat like an archaeological excavation, which sifts through a lot of material to find what is valuable. With regard to a prophetic

book, such as Ezekiel, the question is: Which words originated with the prophet himself, who had direct access to God, and which words were added later by other people, whose thoughts were merely their own?

In a seminar on Ezekiel at the University of California, Berkeley in 1982, visiting professor Moshe Greenberg (from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) told our class about the range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel. The most conservative said that two-thirds of the book went back to the prophet. The most radical (Holscher) had rather arbitrarily decided that Ezekiel wrote only in a poetic style, of which he found the prophet Ezekiel's to be only 17 verses out of 48 chapters. With disagreement of such magnitude, how can anyone be sure what comes from God?

Scholars have developed finely tuned "tools" to identify original human elements in the Bible's formation, such as authors/sources, editors/redactors, literary forms/genres arising from particular life situations, and the origin and development of units of traditional material cited in the Bible. It is true that human sources, redactors, forms, and traditions have played important roles in development of Scripture. But the Bible supplies only sketchy information regarding these, in accord with its own concern to project its messages as originating from God.

Of course, it is legitimate to investigate all information that the Bible provides regarding its human authorship, including its authors/sources, editors, literary forms, etc. But solid biblical information is not enough for "critical" scholars bent on virtually editing the biblical text by attempting to separate human from divine material.<sup>3</sup> So they rely on internal literary clues—such as narrative disconnects (real or apparent) and differences in style—to reconstruct speculatively different strands of authorship.

It is true that the Bible contains different strands of authorship. Books such as Numbers, Chronicles, and Luke explicitly state that they used some oral or written sources. There

were also editors, such as the anonymous individual(s) who added Deuteronomy 34 regarding Moses' death. But scholars go beyond solid evidence to hypothetically reconstruct Yahwistic (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomistic (D), and Priestly (P) sources of the Pentateuch, dating from centuries after Moses, whose historical existence is disbelieved or doubted.

If there was no Moses as the primary human author of the books attributed to him by Jesus and the apostles (e.g., Luke 24:27), he did not receive authoritative messages from God, including instructions for a sanctuary and its services that could serve as an accurate typology of greater and future salvific realities (e.g., Hebrews 7–10). In fact, many critical scholars do not believe that the sanctuary, including the ark of the covenant, ever existed as material, historical entities; they consider them to be only imaginative inventions of Israelite folklore.

The terms *criticism*, *critical*, or *critic* can be positive, as when an art critic analyzes a Rembrandt painting, a rhetorical critic uncovers a literary arch pattern that helps us to understand and appreciate a prophetic oracle, or a textual critic sorts through variants in biblical manuscripts. But source, form, redaction, and tradition criticism are modes of so-called "higher-criticism" that impose human reason over the Bible in ways that affect how people receive its meaning, message, credibility, and authority. Reason itself is good and God-given as an indispensable ally of faith, but reason that displaces God is arrogant and ultimately unreasonable.

Modern critical scholarship of the Bible claims to be scientific. But it routinely breaks one of the cardinal rules of science by attempting to build conclusions on analysis of data that it has altered through speculation to fit its presuppositions. A biologist, chemist, or social scientist would not last long if he or she indulged in a circular approach by adding to or taking away from raw material or data that was supposed to serve as the

subject of investigation. But biblical scholars reach the highest levels of academia by publishing erudite theories based on humanly edited versions of the biblical text.

Several years ago, I was on an escalator with Rolf Rendtorff, a prominent German biblical scholar, after attending a session on Pentateuchal source criticism at an annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. In response to the papers and discussion that they had just heard, Rendtorff remarked, "I want to work with real texts, not homemade texts."

On another occasion, Isaac Kikawada, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley and co-author of *Before Abraham Was*. . ., remarked to me that the J, E, D, and P sources of pentateuchal authorship are "scholarly phantoms that exist only in the minds of scholars." He too wanted to work with real texts, and viewed attempts to identify original messages from God in Scripture (as opposed to merely human additions) as a kind of "misguided fundamentalism."

When Moshe Greenberg told our class about the range of critical commentaries on Ezekiel, I asked him where his forthcoming Anchor Bible Commentary on this biblical book would fit in the spectrum. He replied that his work would not likely be regarded as a critical commentary because he does not believe that the task of a commentator should include editing the text of Scripture. This revealed (1) his integrity as a researcher who does not alter his data, and (2) his understanding that the word *critical* in the context of "historical-critical commentary" refers to a process that involves editing the biblical text, which has come down to us in various manuscript forms, in a speculative attempt to reconstruct an original (and therefore divinely authoritative) text. Critical does not simply mean that a scholar takes all available and relevant contextual, linguistic, and historical data into account when interpreting the text, as Greenberg does in a masterfully comprehensive way.



It is true that critical scholars and their commentaries have made great contributions to our understanding of the Bible, which we can identify only if we are well equipped to differentiate between real data with conclusions logically derived from it versus speculative interpretations. But in recent decades, many biblical scholars have moved away from frustrating attempts to reconstruct earlier phases of the text, which have yielded endless debates about identification of human agents involved in authorship and the extent of their activities, but have not contributed to confidence in divine messages. These scholars prefer to focus on the rich history, meaning, and literary artistry of the existing Bible, which presents enough challenges and rewards for everyone.

Some in the church have thought that they can safely use the tools of the historical-critical method without the skeptical presuppositions associated with them. (This would include, for example, rejecting as unhistorical anything, such as miracles, that cannot be established by such means as analogy or correlation.) Others reject this approach, claiming that the presuppositions are inherent in the tools.

Given that the Bible does give some information regarding its human authorship, a Christian who accepts the whole Bible as the Word of God can legitimately analyze this data regarding sources, forms, and editing/redaction, etc., much the same way a historical critic would analyze it.

However, labeling this a "critical" approach is problematic because critical in this context commonly means "higher-critical," a procedure with the goal of editing the biblical text. The research of a historical-critic may significantly overlap with that of an investigator who believes in the whole Bible, but their aims are different, just as similar technological procedures may be used for very different ends. Also problematic is the fact that "critical" = "higher-critical" employs its tools to go beyond solid biblical

evidence.

Therefore, rather than attempting to convert and baptize the term *critical*, which is inevitably problematic or at least misleading, it is best to seek another label for our exegetical approach. Some have suggested alternatives to “historical-critical method” such as “historical-grammatical method,” but the emphasis of this hermeneutical label seems to be narrower than the comprehensive range of disciplines, contexts, and backgrounds (including archaeology) relevant to the highest-quality wholistic exegesis. “Historical-contextual method” or “wholistic [or “comprehensive”] historical method” would appear more fitting.

Attempts to alter the Bible’s message and authority by treating it as merely human through higher-critical literary approaches, briefly described here, are well known. But their close relationships to some other currently popular manifestations of what could more broadly be called “higher-critical thinking”—such as political correctness or science over the Bible—are less explored.

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To be concluded in the next online edition of *Perspective Digest*.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from *The New Revised Standard Version of the*

*Bible.*

2. See further in Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), especially on Leviticus 17, Contemporary Significance section.

3. See Roy Gane, "An Approach to the Historical-Critical Method," *Ministry* (March 1999), pp. 5-7, 9.